

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**



Volume 7, Issue 6, June 2019

www.ijellh.com

Ms. Ayuta Mohanty

Lecturer in English

C.V. Raman College of Engineering

ayutamohanty@gmail.com

Dr. Pramodini Patnaik

Asst. Professor in English

C.V. Raman College of Engineering

pramodini.eng@gmail.com

Walking towards Empowerment: Indian Women's journey from subjugation to emancipation

Abstract

The life of a woman in a patriarchal setup had to undergo many obstacles. The same goes for woman in India. They keep facing discrimination in every setup throughout their life. The source of obstacles are sometimes from their family while most of the times it is due to the social norms that governs our life. The patriarchal setup treats women like second class citizens. When India was under the British rule, woman experienced 'double colonization', a term coined by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford to point out the oppression of women by both colonial and patriarchal powers. Even achieving independence was not enough to uplift the social status of women in this country. For a long time, women of this country have remained socially, economically, and psychologically handicapped due to religion, social sanctions and patriarchal ideologies. However with time they have started to resist and oppose the treatment that is being meted out to them. This paper analyses five chapters from the book "Walking Towards Ourselves: Indian women tell their stories" edited

by Catriona Mitchell. These three chapters traces the journey of the Indian women from oppression and subjugation to empowerment and emancipation.

Key Words: patriarchal, oppression, subjugation, empowerment, emancipation.

Introduction

Women in India have faced gender discrimination since ages. India being a patriarchal society considers the women in India is quite paradoxical. On one hand the people of India celebrate festivals to honour the Goddess Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga as the symbol of wisdom, wealth and power. On the other hand they treat the women as if they are men's property and commodities. The patriarchal society has an illusion of an ideal woman- a meek, subservient, obedient, faithful, dedicated woman who is devoted to her family and husband and prefers to stay within the four walls of her house. The societal norms are different for a man and different for a woman. The patriarchy uses these norms to subjugate and oppress the women. Any women who rebels against these norms faces scathing criticism from the society as well as her family. This fear forces women to suffer silently the oppression, injustice, torture, and subjugation meted out to them. But with time, women have started identifying their latent power. They have started to step out from the four walls of their house to speak their mind, to create their own identity to stand in solidarity with other women who are being tortured by patriarchal values.

This paper dwells into three chapters taken from the book 'Walking Towards Ourselves: Indian women tell their stories' that traces the journey of Indian women from oppression to emancipation. Even the portions of foreword gives us a hint of how the patriarchy uses myths to subdue women: "The Mahabharata was not to be kept at home, or read by women, as this would cause discord. It realises now that this injunction was born of patriarchal caution, that

the self-willed strength of these epic women was not a role model the men wanted emulated.” (pg-3). In the introduction to the book, Catriona Mitchell, an Australian, makes the readers conscious of the status of women in India by mentioning that “India is one of the most dangerous places on the planet to be a woman” as circulated in the international press. It makes the reader to understand what image our society has in the international arena. Women, coming out and speaking their minds is an act of immense courage and bravery in a patriarchal society like India.

Discussion:

Indian women have always been conditioned since childhood to relate their identities with that of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. They have been taught to endure all the sufferings, tortures, disrespect and humiliation silently. One of the consequences of this silent suffering is the marital rape that many, Indian women are suffering everyday behind closed doors- Marital rape and domestic violence kills the happiness, joy, dreams and aspirations of many Indian women. Similar fate was of the narrator in the chapter “Scenes From A Marriage” and Salma in “Beyond Memories”. The narrator in “Scenes From A Marriage” talks about the pain and agony that a victim of marital rape goes through. She compares rape in its general meaning and marital rape and how difficult it is for the marital rape victims to live life with their perpetrator, who is none other than their own husband. She writes “There are no screams that are loud enough to make a husband stop. There are no screams that cannot be silenced by the shocks of a tight slap” (pg-155). Marriage makes the women weak and endure this act of sexual violence and assault silently. The only other option available is walking out of the marriage that the society strongly prohibits. Her husband does not want to even give her the scope to think of walking by using language to heap shame on her. “Sex, actually rape, becomes his weapon to tame me” (pg-157). He rapes

her repeatedly so that she will become useless for other men, no other man will use her for his pleasure. “That is the aim of his rapes, all this rough sex. Not just a disciplining but a disabling. He believes that after him, I will have nothing left in me to love, to make love, to give pleasure” (pg-158).

Though the writer of this chapter remains anonymous, her pain and agony looks relatable to thousands of women out there who are facing similar scenario.

Salma in “Beyond Memories” describes her father’s solemn/intense desire for a son. When his first wife died after giving birth to their fourth daughter, he married Salma’s mother who also faced the same pressure. But her first child was Salma – a girl. The way her father neglected them made her at her maternal grandparent’s place and returned to her father’s village and when the next child was a son- a male heir, her father agreed to allow Salma to return back. Most Muslim girls in their village were allowed to attend the school maximum till class nine (or till age of thirteen). At the age of thirteen, when they got their first menstrual period” (pg-121), their life suddenly takes a drastic turn. They had to remain within the four walls of their house and were trained in all the “skills necessary for married life and for looking after a family” (pg-121). After that they were married off.

Salma had a deep passion for reading and hence the library that was situated between her house and school became a refuge in her leisure time. Once she went to watch cinema with her friends without taking permission from anyone. From the next day she was not allowed to step out from her home. And during that stage of her life, she started writing poems to convey her feelings of her loneliness. “My poems were full of questions and critiques about how the lone difference of gender was used to strangle women. Rather than expressing a young woman’s typical feelings of joy and celebration, my poems spoke of grief and loneliness” (pg-122). She started sending them to publishers of magazines and finally her poem ‘En Swasam’ got published in a magazine. When the magazine was delivered to her home, Salma

was condemned for her work because of two things. “Firstly, a Muslim woman who had to keep her identity hidden and lead a cloistered life inside her home was expressing herself through poetry. Second, the poems were critical of our narrow, closed society” (pg-123). But instead of being demotivated, she felt happy that her poems had the power to shake the society, may be in a little measure.

After her marriage her in-laws prohibited her to write poems. “Just as a woman was denied the outside world, she was also denied the activities that could give her freedom, recognition and an identity” (pg-123.) But for Salma, her individuality and identity was very important than anything else. Her husband opposed Salma’s habits of reading and writing poems. He threatened to harm her if she didn’t follow his commands. She understood that the patriarchal society has no place for a woman who is strong enough to assert her individuality. Whenever her husband found her poems or books, he destroyed them.

Nothing could break her determination of asserting her individuality. She wrote her poems in the stiffness of night under the pen-name ‘Salma’, and with her mother’s help sent them to the publishers and her mother also received the magazines and brought them to her hiding in cloth bags. After sometime a book of her poems was published that gave Salma fame as a poet. “Some men don’t flinch from using violence against women who resist their authority and disobey their commands. For an Indian man, it is not that difficult a task” (pg-126). Her husband was no different.

Once when she was deep asleep in the night, she woke up with a startle. Her husband was shouting at her to wake up. She got frightened and woke up. She was shocked to hear her husband repeating some lines from her poem. She was so shocked that she sat there trembling. Her husband took a bottle and said to her that “Look this is acid, I bought it just to throw it in your face. Tell me you will never write poems” (pg-128). He told her that she was a ‘whore’ and one of loose character her poetry being the reason and if she had been to

college she would have slept with a lot of men. She felt disgusted hearing all those things. He then banged his head with the wall and threatened to drink kerosene to blackmail her. Finally she promised him that she would never write poetry again. During that time she has finished writing a novel that had taken her three long years. She used to write and hide it between her clothes in the cupboard. But one day she returned from hospital with her ailing child. She found it missing from the cupboard. When she requested her husband to return it back he said that he had burnt them. But later when she found the manuscript in her husband's cupboard, she felt such a relief and joy that cannot be described in words. Her novel got published in 2009. She ends the piece by using the sentence: "Salma would never be voiceless" (pg-130).

In the chapter Oxygen, Urvashi Butalia writes about her love for publishing books for women and how she and her mother fought for the cause of women in their own distinct ways. In 1973, when it was not easy for a woman to go out and work, Urvashi Butalia joined a publishing house after getting support from her mother. Her mother had started a women's centre named 'Karmika' where she helped the oppressed women who wanted help in their fight against injustice. They staged two street plays, and formed a large group named 'Stree Sangharsh'. They would travel and stage the plays to spread awareness against dowry deaths, rape, child abuse and many others. She writes, about her and her mother's bond. In many ways our feminism grew together, my mother's and mine. We were very different" (pg-81). While her mother worked with the activist groups, she started "feminist publishing, of making books by women, about women" (pg-82). Soon women from different corners of the country came to her to give their stories a voice; stories of their fights against patriarchy and gender discrimination. She understood that, "Ordinary, everyday women, they too had a story to tell, a story of courage, of resilience, of the fierce desire to change their lives. And it was publisher's task to bring these otherwise marginalised voices to public attention" (pg-86). She took the responsibility to make sure that these voices should reach the public and motive

more women to speak up. She ends the chapter by writing, “Our feminist journeys had begun at the same time, but they’d taken quite different paths. As happens in life, by the time she was into her eighties, our roles were somewhat reversed, she the ‘child’, I the ‘mother’, both of us feminist, both of us working women, both of us Indian”(pg-87).

Conclusion:

The condition of women as a secondary and inferior being; oppressed and suppressed by the patriarchal society has been existing since ancient times. But with advent of feminism and modernism, times have started to change even in India. Women have started to voice against oppression and injustice to assert their individuality, identity and emancipation. They have started to take steps towards empowerment. The anonymous woman in “Scenes From a Marriage” and the budding poet ‘Salma’ in “Beyond Memories” both faced a lot of oppression from their husbands as their husbands felt that as a man it is their right to establish their control over their wives. While one tortured his wife physically and sexually, the other one tortured his wife emotionally and mentally. But in both the stories, the ending provided some sort of relief as the anonymous woman walked out from her husband’s house and Salma finally published her novel that she wanted very much. These were small steps that these two women took towards their emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy. In the story “Oxygen”, the mother-daughter duo Subhadra and Urvashi Butalia worked for the women’s cause in their own different ways and tried to help the oppressed women and in a way projected an image of an emancipated and empowered women. The journey from oppression to emancipation is not an easy one. The society creates a lot of hurdles in the path of women to dissuade the women from reaching their destination. But women have come a long way towards achieving their goal- emancipation from the shackles of the patriarchal society. But they still have a long way to go before they can become empowered in its

complete sense. The society needs to change its old mind set and accept woman as an equal to man, then only women can be empowered in its complete sense.

Reference

Mitchell, Catriona. *Walking Towards Ourselves: Indian women tell their stories*. Noida: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2016. Print.